Return to God

Sermon, 9/25/09

In both of our readings this morning, the familiar concept of *return* appears. That's what I want us to think about for a bit this morning: the idea of return, and what it might mean for us. Israel sings constantly about coming home in the Old Testament; it's one of the most common images of salvation. Except that it's not first and foremost an image for them; it's a very literal, very concrete desire. The Jews, finding themselves in a strange place, just want to make it back to that little strip of field and desert west of the Jordan, where they can be free and safe, grow their own food, follow their own customs. On the most fundamental level, when the Jews cry out to God for salvation, they're just like tired children begging their parents to take them home again, so they can rest.

Sometimes Christians talk about "going home," too, but they usually mean dying and going to heaven—which is very different from the much more mundane Jewish sense of the idea. It is said in the Letter to the Hebrews that we are "strangers and foreigners on the earth" (11:13), and Paul says in his Letter to the Philippians that "our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20). But those are just metaphors, too, that need to be explained—because heaven is not actually a place, but the roundabout name of our hope for a life where justice and love are all in all.

The thing to remember is that "the land of promise" meant that, too. In a funny way, for Israel, the land of promise names both a place and something placeless at the same time. Maybe Abraham, when the mysterious voice first called him, followed just for the land (and maybe just a little bit out of mischievous curiosity). But he didn't know anything at all about the place yet, or about the one who called him. Little by little, as Israel learned to know and love its Guide, "the promised land" got geographically decentered. It becomes more than just a place; it becomes an active symbol of the Provider's goodness, of her presence, of her love. And the desire to go home, to return to the promised land, becomes in the first place a desire to be with God *wherever God is*.

It's like a child who grows up thinking of Grandma's house as a special place of happiness and warmth, only gradually learning that it's not Grandma's *house* but *Grandma* that he loves. It's Grandma that makes the house what it is. Without Grandma, the house is nothing. And when the Spirit of the Lord leaves the temple—as it has done and may always do—Jerusalem is nothing but emptiness and violence. (You may remember story starting at Ezekiel 10, after many of the Jews have already been driven into exile, where the Spirit of God gets up and takes leave of the temple—noticing along the way the people defrauding each other at the city gate and murders being committed. Instead, God says of those in exile that "though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone" [Ezekiel 11:16]. Though Jerusalem is still God's chosen home, and the scattering is only temporary, the important thing is to dwell in God—who is bound not to the Temple, but to the faithful.)

In the second place, the desire to return home becomes a desire to be the kind of people who can live in loving unity with the One who has made them a people. It becomes a desire to be a loving, generous, just, hospitable, faithful people. In other words, the promised land is the place where what God said holds true in objective fact: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." The promised land is the place where God is present to the people, and where the people are at one with God. To return to the promised land means, ultimately, to be wholly reconciled in God.

Strikingly, "going home" understood in this way can't be a strictly historical event—that is to say, this journey is not one that will ever be over; it's the story of our whole lives. For the newly freed Israelites, "return" simply meant getting out of Egypt and back to the land of their ancestors. For Israel by the time of the exile, and for us, "return" also names the whole human movement towards God and the whole movement of God towards us.

So "return" is a description of what our lives are, or what they should be. Our return to God is not strictly historical—in that it has no defined beginning or end, being simply coextensive with us as human beings—but it is certainly not *ahistorical* or simply spiritual. Our return to God is made up of our daily lives, our daily triumphs, our daily failures. Our return to God is our half-hearted and sometimes painful attempts to love and be loved. Or it's our half-hearted and

sometimes painful attempts just to make it through the day. One of the most beautifully human notes this morning's passages sound is the recognition that, even as Israel is called out of the land of loneliness and distance, "the land of the north," and back to happiness, "with weeping they shall come." The text recognizes that, for one thing, even places we'd rather not be are sometimes difficult to leave; and for another thing, the journey home is hard. The return to God is hard. Israel will head home, but the trip back will still involve suffering. God has called us, and we will follow—but the following will still involve suffering.

Yet there is also great consolation. "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." Part of the consolation, as Jeremiah sees it, is that nobody gets left behind on this trip: the lame and blind are carried and led by the hand, those in labor are tended to. The journey is hard, but the love we're learning makes it easier to help each other along.

Of course, the consolation is much more than camaraderie. It's not just that sharing the load makes things easier to manage, true as that is. We can have real hope for this journey and real joy in it, however long and however difficult, because it really is God who is guiding us to God, Love who is leading us to Love. For Christians this is a concrete reality, since we believe that God has become a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. In him—in his own mundane life, a life of prayer and quarreling and kindnesses and fear—we see divinity itself, and in following him we return to God.